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Accreditation: Sacred Cow or Still Misunderstood?

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**By
Ray J. Leible**

**Midland Police Department
Midland, Texas
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ABSTRACT

The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, CALEA, was spawned in 1979 from a federally funded grant from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). In the nearly 25 years since the inception of CALEA, the issue that remains at hand is, has Accreditation achieved it's over all goal of turning law enforcement into a profession? This research asks the question, Accreditation: Sacred Cow or Still Misunderstood?

When looking at law enforcement Accreditation and specifically at CALEA there has been several articles and a few studies conducted. These can be broken down into two categories beginning with those, which favor Accreditation, but offer little to no empirical evidence to substantiate their claims. However, these articles do point out that CALEA does address those universally accepted issues identified that expose law enforcement agencies to civil liability. The second type, independent research, postulates that law enforcement Accreditation through CALEA is a process driven orientation that does produce some desired outcomes, however there are still no clear cut answers that it achieves, all or even a majority of its intended objectives.

Belief in Accreditation must exist from the highest to lowest level in the agency. The article does an excellent job of outlining the Accreditation process and espousing the supposed virtues of Accreditation. Daughtry acknowledges that Accreditation primarily affects an agency's administrative function(s), more so than front line operations. Over the history of Accreditation, it has been stated time and time again that the entire law enforcement organization must believe in Accreditation for it to truly succeed.

Analysis presented clearly demonstrates that Accreditation has no impact on an agencies ability to control crime. There is no significant correlation between being an accredited agency through CALEA and lowering the crime rate. CALEA in its current form is a sacred cow and it must re-evaluate itself and become more outcome oriented and less process driven.

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INTRODUCTION

The Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, CALEA, was spawned in 1979 from a federally funded grant from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). The founding member organizations were as follows: The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP); the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE); the National Sheriff's Association (NSA); and the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) (Eastman, 1993). The founding members of CALEA were pulled from these four organizations to draft standards and goals that were to address the issues arising from the 668 page *Report on Police* conducted in 1973 by the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals (Daughtry, 1996). In the nearly 25 years since the inception of CALEA, the issue that remains at hand is, has Accreditation achieved its over all goal of turning law enforcement into a profession?

The purpose of the research is to attempt to answer the above stated question, by using measured results, and in doing so look at the accreditation process that has often been described as a process oriented paper chase. This research should then lead to answering the question, Accreditation: Sacred Cow or Still Misunderstood? The methodology used in answering the hypothesis will consist of a literature review, personal observations by the author, and comparison of national and Texas State crime statistics to a randomly selected group of accredited agencies. The random sample will be of members of TALON, Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and New Mexico, CALEA Pac of Accredited agencies. This group of agencies provides an excellent cross section of large, medium, and small departments engrossed in the accreditation process.

The anticipated findings of the research is that there may not be a definitive answer as to the ultimate value of Accreditation and that the answer is left to individual department head of a law enforcement agency. When one bears in mind what it means to be a profession, working from a codified body of knowledge to seek, develop, and incorporate new methods of practice through continuous training; the chief executive must weigh the role of Accreditation in that process. Thus, the implications of this research to law enforcement regarding Accreditation is at the least, to add to the base knowledge of what is known about Accreditation, and at the most, suggest whether or not Accreditation is a sacred cow or still misunderstood within, and outside, the law enforcement profession.

Before proceeding a definition of a sacred cow is in need. A sacred cow is simply defined in American Heritage Dictionary as “one that is immune from criticism.” It has been stated by some that “speaking against something as high sounding as a “Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies” is akin to attacking motherhood, lobbying against apple pie, and flying in the face of all that is decent (Unknown, 2002).” However, a critical look at a process that has been around for nearly a quarter of a century is necessary to determine if in fact, there is a correlation between Accreditation and professional policing in the 21st Century.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When discussing past research in the area of law enforcement accreditation it becomes apparent that accreditation itself is just one form of recognition that is sought to attempt to demonstrate professionalism. Recognition begins with some form of licensing, followed by certification, which can be both specific and general, registration in a database,

and finally formal accreditation representing the agency as conforming to some specific body of regulations and standards. In practice, law enforcement agencies use a combination of all these in the never ending attempt to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness.

When looking at law enforcement accreditation and specifically at CALEA there has been several articles and a few studies conducted. In the early stages, CALEA came under fire in a 1983 article entitled “National Accreditation: A Costly, Unneeded Make-Work Scheme” which was authored by W.E. Eastman. Eastman surmised that there would be several insurmountable problems with Accreditation that included the taking away local rule of a policing agency under this truly federal program (Eastman, 1983). There may be problems, which will be addressed later with CALEA, however this author could find no empirical evidence to back up Eastman’s early assertions and predictions.

Much of what has been written over the years since the inception of CALEA is about the Accreditation process itself and officers’ perception. One of the better studies put forward in this regard was conducted in 1992 by Lt. Corkey Sandel of the College Station, Texas Police Department. In Sandel’s research he noted that law enforcement Accreditation had gained in popularity and acceptance, however not to the degree that many had expected and hoped for (Sandel, 1992). Sandel found that support for Accreditation dwindled within an organization going down the chain of command, and in order for Accreditation to succeed it cannot be viewed simply as an administrative tool.

Along these same lines, Cheurprakobkit 1996, in his research of 14 accredited Texas police agencies surmised the following:

Although viewed as beneficial, law enforcement accreditation raises concerns among agencies, especially the cost and time

issues. However, the effects and attributes of Accreditation should not be overlooked by police executives if the goals of their agencies are to strive for consistency, accountability, and professional operating standards and procedures. Commitment to accreditation must precede its process. Belief in accreditation must exist from the highest to lowest level in the agency. Otherwise, sound policies and procedures will only appear on paper but be futile on the street (p.6).

Perhaps, Cordner & Williams conducted the best study in addressing the issue of compatibility or lack thereof between Accreditation and Community Policing in 1998. In their studied entitled, "Community Policing and Accreditation: Compatibility or Conflict?" the authors conducted a content analysis of the 897 CALEA Standards in effect at the end of 1992 and the revised set of 436 published in 1994 that are still in effect today. It was concluded that standards do not directly conflict with community policing, but neither do they provided strong support for the community policing. The standards support a traditional, formalistic approach to police administration, yet they do not require centralization, specialization, or more hierarchy. Finally, the standards are written in such a way that they are overwhelmingly process-oriented, rather than outcome-oriented, and as such measuring their effectiveness in the actual delivery of police services is inherently problematic (NCJRS Abstracts, 2002).

In a 1997 published article entitled, Police Liability: What Leading Law Enforcement Executives Need to Know, Dr. James J. Fyfe identified the following areas as being critical to a law enforcement organization and as such absolutely requires clear policies, training, and accountability: (1) deadly force; (2) non-lethal force; (3) vehicle pursuit and emergency driving; (4) responding to domestic violence; (5) restraining and transporting prisoners; (6) off-duty conduct; and (7) citizen complaint procedures (CALEA Update Issue 65, 1997). Fyfe surmises that nothing absolutely guarantees against police

liability, however it remains true that “the best way to protect a law enforcement agency is to assure that the professional law enforcement standard of care is reflected in its policies, training, and practices (CALEA Update Issue 65, p.9).” As one can see from the cite of this information, CALEA believes that it establishes the professional law enforcement standard, however, it can be argued that standards can, and will vary from region to region, within our country, and others besides CALEA influence what those standards are and how they are implemented.

When the current CALEA Executive Director, Sylvester Daughtry, Jr. was the Chief of Police of the Greensboro, North Carolina Police Department and President of CALEA in 1996, he wrote an article called, Time to Take Another Look at Law Enforcement Accreditation which appeared in the November, 1996 issue of Police Chief Magazine. The article does an excellent job of outlining the Accreditation process and espousing the supposed virtues of Accreditation. It is pointed out that the CALEA Commission is made up of twenty-one volunteers, eleven are current law enforcement executives, with ten representing public officials, educators, business leaders, and the like (Daughtry, 1996). The benefits of CALEA Accreditation are put forth in the following manner: “Besides bestowing recognition on outstanding law enforcement agencies, accreditation confers such benefits as an improved, more effective administrative system, reduced liability potential, greater supervisory accountability and greater governmental and community support (Daughtry, 1996 p. 20).” The official CALEA web site lists the major benefits of Accreditation in this order: Controlled liability insurance costs; stronger defense against lawsuits and citizen complaints; greater accountability within the agency; staunch support from government officials; and increased community advocacy.

Daughtry acknowledges that Accreditation primarily affects an agency's administrative function(s), more so than front line operations. This admission lends credence to the fact that the virtually all research in this area shows that front line officers of accredited agencies have very little knowledge of, or appreciation for Accreditation. A large majority of articles published about the processes involved in achieving accreditation status address the issue of "officer buy-in." One of tactics offered is a classic example of double talk when answering the often asked question by officers of "What does accreditation do for me?" to which the accreditation manager reply's, "Accreditation may not directly put money in your pocket, but it won't take it out either! (French, Jr, 2002). Finally, Daughtry ends his article with the following statement and prediction of his future full-time employer: "Clearly, CALEA is a major factor in contemporary law enforcement, and the progressiveness and professionalism it represents will be embraced by more and more agencies in the years to come (p.23);" we will see later if this prediction has come to fruition.

McCabe & Fajardo wrote, in 2001, one of the few and most recent studies found in addressing the issue Accreditation as it relates to the professionalism of law enforcement in. In their study entitled, "Law Enforcement Accreditation: A National Comparison of Accredited vs. Non-accredited Agencies," they found that accredited agencies require the following:

- more field training hours;
- minimum educational requirements for beginning officers;
- policy for drug testing of sworn police applicants; and
- the operation of special drug and child abuse units (p. 129).

All of the findings of this study however, were not always complimentary to Accreditation and include the following areas of concern: accredited agencies do not enjoy higher salaries for officers or operating budgets; no difference in the demographics of race and sex of officers to reflect agencies' jurisdiction's residents that happens to be a CALEA Standard; accredited agencies officers were no more likely to be mandated to wear body armor (this could be a result of the overall attention given to the administrative process to the exclusion of the front line officer); and although accredited agencies were more likely to operate some form of specialized units, they were not more likely to have specialized units to specifically address the growing problems of domestic violence and gangs even though there are many federal grants available to do so (McCabe & Fajardo, 2001).

Perhaps the most poignant observation made by the authors at the conclusion of this study is as follows:

Finally, there still remains the question of the link between police professionalism and Accreditation. The Commission was created in an attempt to assist in the professionalization of police. Is Accreditation the best way to establish police work as a profession, or are researchers in the area of police professionalism simply grasping at some new concept, which appears to provide a standardization of police practice?(p. 130).

In comparing the information offered by this literature review, perhaps the best way to view the results is to separate the independent research from the somewhat self-serving, subjective Accreditation propaganda articles. The articles supporting Accreditation offer little in the way of empirical data to back up their claims, however; they do point out that CALEA does address those universally accepted issues identified that expose law enforcement agencies to civil liability. The similarity and trends in the independent research suggest that Accreditation through CALEA is a process driven orientation that does produce some desired outcomes, however there are still no clear cut answers that it

achieves, all or even a majority of its intended objectives. Over the history of Accreditation, it has been stated time and time again that the entire law enforcement organization must believe in Accreditation for it to truly succeed. The current literature suggests that this has not occurred.

METHODOLOGY

Again, the focus of this research is to answer the question of whether law enforcement Accreditation through CALEA, in its nearly 25 years of existence, has achieved its over all goal of making law enforcement into a profession? The answer to this question at first examination is that there are no clear cut answers, and depending on one's position inside a law enforcement agency the answer could be yes or no. However, this author hypothesizes that when answering the question based upon measured results, the comparison of UCR Crime Rate Data between accredited and non-accredited agencies, the answer is no. Thus, CALEA has not met its overall claim of making an accredited agency more professional and it has become a sacred cow within law enforcement.

The method of inquiry used for this research consisted of a review of literature regarding the issue of Accreditation for law enforcement, personal observations made by the author who is an active participant in the Accreditation process of his own agency, and comparison of UCR national and Texas state crime statistics with a randomly selected group of the TALON, Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and New Mexico, CALEA Pac of agencies. The information obtained through these research instruments will be put forth in table format and discussion.

FINDINGS

As stated earlier, the findings of the literature review can be categorized into two parts. The first are the articles written and published by those who favor Accreditation and expose the supposed virtues of Accreditation, but offer little to no empirical evidence to substantiate their claims. As well intentioned as these articles are, they are full of subjective criteria and thus it is virtually impossible to substantiate or repudiate their claims. However, a personal observation from the author is that articles of this type that state Accreditation raises morale and gives a greater sense of esprit decor among the rank and file officers is totally unfounded. Not only is this not true, at the department this author works at, but in all the personal conversations the author has had with administrators and practitioners about Accreditation it is not true in many other accredited agencies. This particular claim is also the second type of literature reviewed and is not backed-up by any independent research that has been presented. As a matter of fact, the independent research reviewed, consistently states that if Accreditation is going to succeed it must permeate the law enforcement organization, which in 25 years it has been unable to achieve.

Personal observations and conversations have been conducted for this study in the last 14 months regarding Accreditation since joining the Planning & Research Division of the thrice-accredited Midland, Texas Police Department that was first accredited in 1993. Having been in preparation during this time for the next scheduled re-accreditation on-site CALEA inspection this author has been a quick study of the process by attending two TALON Pac meetings and the November, 2002 Portland, Oregon National CALEA Conference. In speaking with others at these meetings and conferences, there are many who are not willing to speak publicly against CALEA. However, in private will state such

things as Accreditation being a dog and pony show that is nothing more than window dressing for the public and is a very subjective process. As one Chief, who wished to remain anonymous, related in a conversation in Portland, “it would be political suicide for me to discontinue being accredited at this time, so we will continue to jump through all the hoops and pay the fees.” However, there were just as many persons willing to speak about how great Accreditation is and laud its benefits. Upon pressing the issue with them, this study found that their job status depended on their agency to continue the Accreditation process.

When comparing UCR Crime Report Data produced by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the author randomly selected 12 TALON Pac Accredited Agencies of the 77 available, about a 15.5% sample representing different size agencies. UCR Data of Part 1 Crime Rates were compared between these selected agencies to the National and State of Texas averages from the years 1998 to 2001 with the following results:

VIOLENT CRIME

	1999	2000	2001
Accredited	-8%	+5%	+2%
National	-7%	0%	+1%
State	-1%	-1%	+7%

PROPERTY CRIME

	1999	2000	2001
Accredited	-2%	+1%	+2%
National	-7%	0%	+2%
Texas	0%	+3%	+6%

TOTAL PART 1 CRIMES

	1999	2000	2001
CALEA	-2%	+1%	+2%
National	-7%	0%	+2%
Texas	0%	+2%	+6%

The numbers above clearly demonstrate that Accreditation has no impact on an agencies ability to control crime. There is no significant correlation between being an accredited agency through CALEA and lowering the crime rate. Therefore, an absence of any causal relationship exists. CALEA cannot predict Accreditation participation will fulfill the stated goal of strengthening crime prevention and control capabilities. Based upon this information, it can be argued that the CALEA claim of boosting citizen confidence is also diminished when considering the public expects law enforcement to control crime at some level.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to answer the question: In the nearly 25 years that the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies has been in existence, has it achieved its overall goal of making law enforcement into a profession? It was hypothesized that when analyzing Uniform Crime Report Data between accredited and non-accredited agencies both nationally and from the State of Texas the answer is no, CALEA has not achieved its overall goal.

As stated above, the conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that there is absolutely no correlation between Accreditation and the ability to control the crime rate or strengthen crime prevention. The importance of this is that it goes to the core of what is expected of any law enforcement agency, whether one agrees or disagrees with the overall ability of the police to have any effect on crime. Criminologists have made the point over and over that what really effects the crime rate are social factors that begin with income, unemployment, education levels, prevalence of minorities, households headed by single women, household size, and home ownership (Walker, 1989). However, the general public is not as informed as criminologists, and enlightened law enforcement executives understand that they must speak to their local crime rate. In doing so, they must weigh the benefits, or lack thereof, of being accredited as it relates to the crime rate.

It can also be concluded by what has been presented in this study and the independent research cited, that at the very least CALEA has credibility issues with the front-line officers. In the 25 years of Accreditation there has yet to be a definitive answer as to how to get the ever illusive buy in from the rank and file officer. This may be a factor as to why CALEA Executive Director Sylvester Daughtry's earlier cited 1996 prediction

that more and more agencies will enter the Accreditation in years to come has not come to fruition; along with several other elements. As of June, 2003 there were 598 agencies involved in the Accreditation, or the more recently added CALEA programs of certification and recognition, which is a 19% reduction from the all time high of 739 (CALEA, 2003). Clearly, as Sandel's 1992 study suggested, the concept of CALEA Accreditation has not swept through law enforcement as many may have expected and hoped.

The limitations of this study begin with the very well documented restrictions of UCR Data and crime statistics in general that do not need to re-addressed here. However, until a different system is imposed the Uniform Crime Report is the measurement instrument that is used and accepted by the public. There was also only three years of this data presented that could be argued as not a large enough sample. This author would argue one can go back to 1979 and a longitudinal studies will show the same results. Perhaps, the most glaring limitation of this study is that the ability to influence the crime rate is only one of a plethora of criteria that should be used to gage the effectiveness or professionalism of a policing agency. However, this study would argue that while the other criteria is important and obviously factors into the equation, the baseline of such an equation starts with addressing the crime rate issue.

The relevance of this study to law enforcement is that it suggests while there are certainly benefits to being an accredited agency, it does not lend itself to curtailing crime nor to the more important issue of influencing police culture in a positive light. As stated repeatedly in this and other studies, unless Accreditation permeates the entire organization it will not succeed as advertised. Law Enforcement executives must take a hard look at Accreditation in its current form, and conclude that it is a sacred cow after 25 years.

CALEA must re-evaluate itself and become more outcome oriented and less process driven. CALEA's goal should be to impact positively, the police culture, which in-turn will do more to professionalize law enforcement than any written standard could possibly achieve. There is a definite need and place for Accreditation in law enforcement, but it must correlate to outcome-based results.

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